

CLIVE BARKER'S



**BOOKS
OF
BLOOD**

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STEALTH PRESS

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PREFACE



IN 1984 AND 1985, a young and unknown playwright from England published, to little initial fanfare, six small paperback collections of horror stories. The author’s fellow Liverpoolian Ramsey Campbell – himself a remarkable writer of tales of unease—was quick to recognize the quality of the work contained therein and provided an insightful and prescient introduction to the first of the volumes. The books themselves, however—as physical objects at least—seemed to emblazon their presumed fate of niche-specific sales and imminent oblivion with their gestural covers, ungenerous type-size, and eager-to-yellow pages.

Astonishingly, though, within two years both the author and the books themselves had achieved not only spectacular sales and wonderful reviews but an almost iconic status in the field of imaginative literature. The author, Clive Barker, was decreed by no less an authority than Stephen King to be “the future of horror” and the books—collectively and individually known as *The Books of Blood*—were, thanks to their stunning combination of literary finesse, metaphysical ambition, and unflinchingly-confrontational imagery, held up as a new benchmark for writings of the dark fantastic.

“Everybody is a book of blood; Wherever we’re opened, we’re red” was the epigraph with which Clive ushered his readers into his world and in which—in a brief eleven words—he also managed to encapsulate the bravura tonal juxtapositions that were soon to be acclaimed as some of the most startling and refreshing things about the stories themselves. Within the epigraph’s tiny length we have the appeal to the Universal from the personal (what is true for the individual is equally true for the species), we have the combination of a shameless old groaner of a pun (red and read) with a visceral image that stops the groan in its tracks, and we have a speculative metaphysical implication that our meaning is wrapped in our physical being but that only with the rending of the flesh can that meaning be understood. So before we even begin reading the first story in the collection we have been introduced to a gleeful and masterful collision of a comic sensibility that should have died with Vaudeville, some philosophical musings on the fragility of the flesh and the survival of the spirit, and a vivisectionist’s insistence on an open-eyed apprehension of physical trauma. And all expressed in the same number of syllables as a haiku. Not bad. Not bad at all.

And we go on to find that—with the exception only of that obsessive miniaturist precision—the stories themselves echo the epigraph’s ambitious catholicism of concerns. We learn

quickly that we must proceed with caution down the paths on which these stories lead us, not knowing as we turn each corner whether we are about to given a fright, an insight, or a bloody good laugh. Sometimes, of course, it will be all three at once: Unexpected simultaneities and confluences abound; terror is modulated by insight which is leavened by laughter which is in turn qualified by a sly stiletto of dread. To read a Clive Barker short story is akin to attending a private viewing of an autopsy conducted jointly by Soren Kierkegaard and Stan Laurel.

IT IS seventeen years since the first publication of these stories and more than twenty since the first of them were written. In those intervening years, Clive has moved on to a celebrated and multifarious career as novelist, artist, and film director and producer. His work is both popular and influential, his complex and idiosyncratic visions having been, amazingly, embraced not only by those intellectuals refreshingly free of canonical tunnel vision but also by the mass audience. Though it is true that the range of concerns demonstrated in his later work means he can no longer simply be categorized as a particular type of writer—Quentin Tarantino, for example, recently remarked that to call Clive Barker a horror writer is the same as calling The Beatles a garage band—he has never lost sight of, nor affection for, the work that first established him. Indeed, ever since those first fragile paperback editions saw print, he has wanted to present *The Books of Blood* to his public in the form he originally intended—as one huge compendious volume.

I first read these stories in hand-written drafts in the appallingly dingy bed-sit in North London that I called home twenty-one years ago. Clive—as broke as I was—had walked them round to me from his own flat about a mile away. Nowadays, we still live within a few miles of each other, albeit in a somewhat-sunnier clime. It was one of the great pleasures of my life to be able to call Clive about eight months ago and—in my capacity as a Consulting Editor for the worthy folks of Stealth Press—ask him if he was still interested in seeing all the stories of *The Books of Blood* within one set of covers. Clive not only agreed to give the project his blessing but actively collaborated on its creation—both designing the cover and providing the photograph that is its centerpiece.

Along with everyone at Stealth, I am very proud to present the complete version of me old mate's groundbreaking masterpiece: The one-volume definitive edition of Clive Barker's *Books of Blood*. But I'm prouder still to note that, despite the sumptuous trappings in which we've dressed it, the thing itself defies the musty and safe connotations of the word "classic" and remains as fresh and powerful as ever. Dangerous, transgressive, and audacious, it is still the future of horror—its dark visions and imaginative explorations unsurpassed by anything the field has produced since.

Peter Atkins
Los Angeles, September 2001